The Bowens Family

Richmond Bowens is buried near the entrance to Drayton Hall Plantation. It is a fitting resting place for Bowens, Drayton Hall's gatekeeper who spent nearly two decades telling stories of his family's connection to the plantation. Bowens said his family came to the Carolina Colony from Barbados as slaves with the Drayton family.

Born Sept. 2, 1908, a son of Richmond and Anna Bowens, Bowens grew up at Drayton Hall and didn't leave until just before World War II. He moved to Chicago where he worked mostly as a chauffeur. He returned to Charleston in the mid-70s and became a gatekeeper and oral historian at Drayton Hall.

In November 1996, a year before he died, Bowens traveled to Barbados and received a celebrity's welcome. He met the prime minister, the U.S. ambassador and two brothers who live near the Bowens ancestral home in Barbados and whose last name is Bowen, spelled without the "s". Because the younger men resembled him, Richmond Bowens believed they are related and that he was reunited with his family.

Bowens' cousin, Valerie Bowens-Gadsden of Charleston, who went to Barbados with him, said, "Traveling to Barbados was like a pilgrimage for him. I was happy he had the opportunity to fulfill a life-long dream. He was a family icon who brought a rich sense of history to everyone who met him," she said.

When David Bowen of Barbados met Bowens they saw a family resemblance. It was the face, the shape of the head and nose that gave them a feeling that after 300 years their family - separated by slavery – was reunited. Richmond Bowens said, "Well, you know the Bowens, they all resemble one another. All of them have a certain kind of look." They met at the St. Lucy Parish Church, an Anglican sanctuary near Hope Plantation that is believed to be Richmond Bowens' ancestral home.

During an interview in the fall of 1997, Bowens sat on the porch of a little wood-frame house at Drayton Hall where he customarily sat to tell his stories. When Bowens was 14 it was his home. Bowens didn't notice that clouds had turn darker, and the breeze rustled the leaves above the house. He just kept talking and with each story, he punctuated it with: "I am telling you what I know."

When he was a boy at Drayton Hall families grew corn and fed it to horses and cows. They tended vegetable and flower gardens. People lived close to the earth. Children got close attention, too. Everyone took responsibility for the children, he said from his rocking chair.

People had respect. Men went into the woods to gamble, away from the disapproving glare of church people. What a person did, Bowens said, determined how one lived. Off in the misty distance, Bowens recalls a hovering light. No matter how fast he'd run toward it, he could not reach it. It was the will-o'-the-wisp, he said.

"Will-O'-The-Wisp, Mr. Bowens' Days Along the Ashley," is a collection of his stories about Drayton Hall. Written by Charleston author Thelma Hughes Gillam, the book was published in 1995. Bowens reached for a copy. He read from a chapter titled "Charleston in the 1920s."

"If my mother was going to Charleston to shop, we would take a buggy into town. Mr. Sigwall had a yard on Cannon Street right next to that fire station before you get to King Street. He had a stable there and all the people who come in wagons and buggies they would park their wagons and buggies in that yard. He had stalls to put the horses in. And if the people want the horses shoed and needed any kind of blacksmith work done while they go shopping, he'd do that. The buggy and the wagon was charged the same price. It wasn't much, but everybody paid. A two-seated buggy was called a hack," he said.

A buggy wasn't the only way to get to Charleston, he said. The train picked up passengers not far from Drayton Hall. They'd get off in the city at the east end of Columbus Street. The ride costs 15 cents. To tell his stories, Bowens used more than memory. Behind his green rocking chair, a bundle of long stalks of brown sage grass leaned against the little red house. "We swept the yard with that," he said. From a desk drawer, he pulled a dried stalk of rice, protected in a plastic bag. The owners of Drayton Hall grew rice and other crops.

He removed a big black binder from the drawer. It held a family tree that includes his grandfather, Caesar Bowens, his brother, John, and their sister, Catherine. When did they come to Drayton Hall from Barbados? "I don't know," Bowens answered in a soft voice, seeming to regret that detail is as unreachable as the will-o'-the-wisp.

Slavery at Drayton Hall, he said, "wasn't rosy because people were powerless." But when Bowens was a boy at Drayton Hall, it was a better time. "It was a wonderful beautiful place. You didn't have nobody telling you [that] you can't step here or step there. I am telling you what I know."

The Bowens family was the only one to remain at Drayton Hall after emancipation, he said. Other black families moved there and worked in the area in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Bowens died in June 1998 at age 89. Charles Drayton, a seventh-generation descendant of John Drayton, recalled Bowens as "a good, old wonderful friend. We grew up together."

George McDaniel, director of Drayton Hall, said, "It is hard to say what Richmond Bowens was in one sentence. He was a gentleman, a family man, a Christian, an educator, a historian, a storyteller and a man with a wonderful heart.

"People were attracted to him all through his years of work at Drayton Hall, and he tried to honor their interest in history by telling them, as honestly and as accurately as he could, the story of his life and his community and the values in which he was raised."

Bowens was laid to rest in a cemetery where his relatives are buried. McDaniel said, "It is believed that Caesar is buried there, too."